

ANCIENT TAHITIAN SOCIETY

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THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF HAWAII
HONOLULU



UNIVERSITY of
HAWAII
PRESS

OPEN ACCESS



Open Access edition funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities / Andrew W. Mellon Foundation *Humanities Open Book Program*.



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Open Access ISBNs:

9780824884536 (PDF)

9780824884543 (EPUB)

This version created: 25 September, 2019

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Marae

Marae were the sanctity and glory of the land; they were the pride of the people of these islands. The ornaments of the land were the marae, they were the palaces presented to the gods. (Henry 1928:150)

In the myths of creation epitomized earlier in this chapter, it will be recalled that even after Ta'aroa had brought the universe into being, and even after it had begun to be populated with gods, humans, and demigods, disorder and chaos continued to reign. Darkness (*pō*) prevailed everywhere and entities were not fixed in their proper places. A number of actions contributed to bringing order out of chaos, including the raising of the sky off the earth and the slowing down of the sun in his daily sweep across the heavens; but order was not fully established until relations between spirits and humans became regularized, and for this it was necessary to establish marae, where humans could "receive the gods in a befitting manner" (Henry 1928:429), with prayers and offerings presented through properly qualified intermediaries, mainly priests.

As we have seen, mortal humans' souls sometimes entered the sphere

of spirits while asleep or entranced, and spirits visited mortals in many guises and in many kinds of settings; but the marae were the edifices where most of the interaction between spirits and humans took place. There are some grounds for concluding that Maohis considered marae to be outposts of *pō* (spirits' sphere, or "room," of the universe) within the *ao* (mortals' sphere), but this contrast cannot be pushed too far, because of lack of explicit native verbalizations on this matter. Also, in most cases about which such information is available, each marae was primarily devoted to interaction between a specific group or category of humans and a particular set of spirits (Henry 1928:132, 453). That is to say, no marae known to me served as an all-inclusive meeting place between humans and spirits in general—or rather, no edifice that I propose to call a marae served as such.

In the absence of the kind of linguistic evidence essential for authentic semantics, I can only guess at what the Maohis themselves felt to be the primary, as distinct from derivative, references of their very common word *marae*. For example, the miniature houses in which the images of some of the more powerful *atua* were kept, called *fare atua* by the Maohis, and "arks" by some of the European visitors, were also referred to as *marae*, as were the parts of the boats on which such images and their houses were transported (Morrison 1935:179). *Marae* seems also to have referred to some places set aside for burial—including one for dogs (Beaglehole 1961:419). In certain circumstances, as set forth in a chant reproduced in Henry, the sea itself was called a *marae*:

E pure tei te nu'u tai mimiha;
(There was prayer in the moving rolling ocean;)
o te moana te marae nui o te ao nei.
(the sea was the great temple of the [human] world.) (1928:356)

And not just metaphorically for, as Henry explained elsewhere: "On the sea-side the wanderer or exile who owned no land [i.e., had access to no specific place of worship] worshipped his god. There he presented his son or daughter in marriage, there he offered his newborn child to his tutelar god, and there he presented himself or members of his family when sick or dying to the healing gods, and to Ta'aroa" (1928:144).

In any case, for my present purposes I shall use the word *marae* to refer primarily to any man-made structure consisting minimally of a discrete area of ground containing fixed places for interaction between humans and spirits. Specifically, the fixed places included at least some locus for one or more spirits and for one or more humans. Many marae also contained one or more of the following fixed elements: altars, graves, et cetera, for offerings to spirits; shelters used for storing paraphernalia not in actual use; pits or piles for disposing of ritual objects no longer subject to use; graves for temporary burial of certain deceased members of the

marae's congregation; and loci for investing humans in certain marae-associated offices. Finally, in some locations several more or less discrete marae (each containing one or more of the above fixed elements) were spatially and ritually combined into marae complexes. (Figs. 3-10 through 3-12.)

Perhaps the most succinct contemporary description of marae functions and architecture is that of the missionary Jefferson:

Morai, in the language of the country, signifies a place appropriated to the worship of Eatooa, or deity. As the Otaheiteans have a plurality of deities, so they have many *morais*. They are temporary or permanent. Temporary *morais* are erected before the corpse of the dead agreeable to the fancy of the erector, and (from what I have hitherto seen) are commonly small altars, variously decorated, with leaves and the fruit of palm tree, that grows in abundance, and upon which are placed divers offerings of food. Permanent *morais* are numerous and divers: they are usually enclosed spots of ground surrounded with trees of different kinds, and having in them sundry small pavements of stone: at the head of each stands a stone of larger size, and at the back of the stone is generally fixed a board five or six feet long, with a little rude carving on it; the top divided into five parts, or slits, to represent the fingers of a hand: sometimes the board has the figure of a man or bird carved on its top. At the foot of this pavement the priest worships, with his face directed towards the headstone and plank, and throws his offering, consisting of a young plantain-tree root, green leaves, or the leaf of a cocoa-nut twisted in a peculiar form, upon the pavement. Besides these kinds of oratories within the enclosure, there are altars, on which meat offerings are placed, and before which prayers are made. Altars for the like purpose are scattered up and down the country where there is no *morai*. At one permanent place of worship, there are frequently a plurality of *morais* dedicated to different deities: thus the one I now visited, had in it two others dedicated to as many false gods. (LMS Transactions:I, 98)

This much is known, or can be credibly inferred, about the major functional components of marae. In addition, it is possible in some instances to identify certain functional components with specific architectural elements, to which I now turn.⁴⁴

The "discrete areas of ground," which I propose were a feature of every structure I call a marae, varied greatly in area; some were no larger than a few square meters, while others comprised areas of several thousand meters. Most of these areas were floored with flagstones, river boulders, or pebbles, in whole or in part. Usually marae were laid out on naturally level ground, with pavements flush with ground level or raised somewhat to form a low platform. In uneven locations attempts appear to have been made to level their floors by means of excavations and terracing (sometimes built out into the lagoon), occasionally resulting in floors at two or more levels. The larger marae were roughly rectangular in outline and usually bounded by continuous stone walls of heights ranging from less than a meter to two or more.

A prominent feature of most of the larger marae was the *ahu*, a more or less rectangular platform built of stones and located adjacent to one of

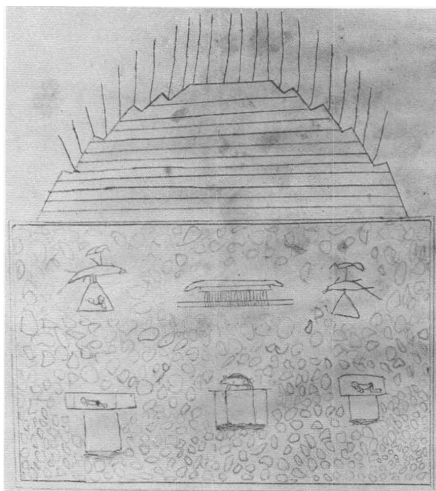


FIGURE 3-10. Marae plan. Unsigned drawing. Cook's first voyage. British Museum.

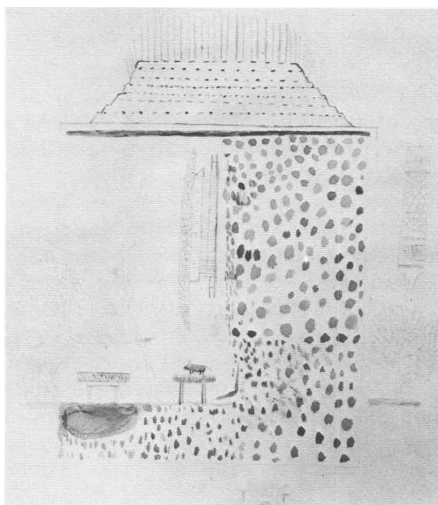


FIGURE 3-11. Marae plan. Unsigned drawing. Cook's first voyage. British Museum.

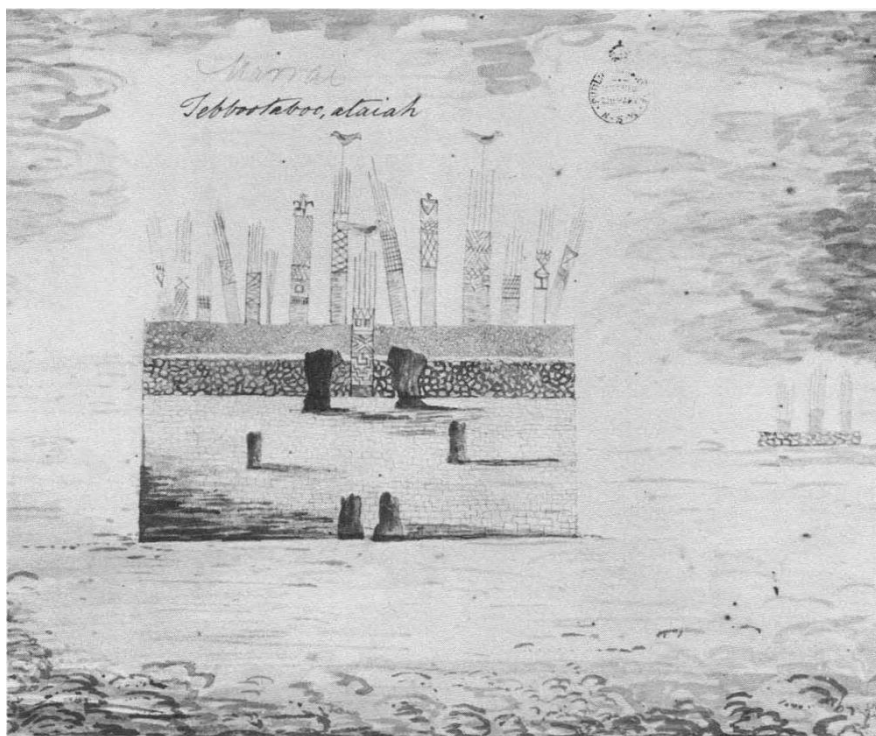


FIGURE 3-12. Marae Taputapuātea, Tahiti. Drawing by W. Bligh. Mitchell Library, Sydney. (Top right, library identification stamp.)

the marae's shorter boundaries—either separated from or continuous with the marae walls. Many *ahu* consisted of only a rough pile of boulders three to four meters long and one or more meters wide. Others were constructed of carefully worked stone put together to form a single or multilevel platform.⁴⁵ The largest was the ten-step pyramid of Mahaitea marae (Papara, Tahiti), which was about 81 by 24 meters broad at the base and 14 meters high.⁴⁶

An *ahu* was the place on or near which the congregation's tutelary spirits mainly stayed when they visited the marae. Having few reliable first-hand accounts of actual marae rituals,⁴⁷ I am not able to describe specifically and comprehensively what uses were made of *ahu*, but I can state in a general way what these elements were not. For one thing, they did not serve primarily as altars for offerings to spirits. One eyewitness drawing shows human skulls resting on an *ahu* (Beaglehole 1967:224-225); these were the remains presumably either of human sacrifices or of enemies slain in battle, but the food offerings to spirits that formed a regular part of marae rituals were placed elsewhere. Also, although marae functionaries may occasionally have climbed onto *ahu* for some purpose or other,

when rituals were in progress and spirits were actually present, they and not humans usually occupied these platforms.

As indicated above, not every structure I label marae contained an *ahu*, but every marae did contain a fixed element, usually one or more stone uprights that served as a principal locus for visiting spirits; and like *ahu* these were invariably located near one end of the marae. In addition, in many cases stone uprights, usually consisting of worked slabs of limestone or of columns of basalt, were fixed into the tops of *ahu* or set into the ground against the side of the *ahu* facing the marae court. In some instances there was only one such upright, but the usual number was three.

Another architectural element reserved mainly for spirits was the *ava'a*, 'gods' bed', found in some marae. It consisted of a small stone platform immediately adjacent to the *ahu*. It served principally as a place for resting the images of the marae's tutelars during the rituals, and as such was considered to be the 'most sacred place' (*te vahi mo'a roa*) in the marae; but in some cases it served also as the place on which an individual stood when being invested with the highest-ranking Title associated with the marae in question.⁴⁸ Some *ava'a* are said to have covered a cist in which were deposited the images' discarded coverings.

Most marae contained stone uprights in addition to those mentioned above. Some of these were broad limestone slabs, others were basalt columns; their height above ground ranged from thirty or forty cm to two or more meters. The numbers of these uprights varied considerably, as did their arrangements. In many cases there was a group of three of them set close to and in front of the *ahu*, and another one or two set near the center of the marae court. In some marae these were the only uprights present, in others there were additional ones facing either the *ahu* or the center of the courtyard. And in some marae there were no such uprights at all.

Interpretations differ concerning the function of these courtyard uprights. According to various reports they were leaning posts for officiating priests, backrests for the highest-ranking Titleholders of the congregation, resting places for visiting spirits, memorial stones for departed chiefs, and presumably resting places for the latter's visiting ghosts (Emory 1933:16-17). The possibility, or even probability, is that in some marae there were uprights for all these purposes (with considerable variation as to which was which), while in others some uprights served more than one purpose, according to circumstances.

In this connection, one will recall that *tapa'u*, priests' effigies fashioned out of braided coconut leaves, were sometimes attached to certain stone uprights to represent—and presumably to substantiate—continuous prayer, even when rites were not being conducted.

Some drawings of marae made by visiting Europeans show numbers

of *unu* set up in the courtyard and on top of the *ahu*. These were wooden boards a meter or more high, variously carved and painted (usually with red ochre), and sometimes hung with feathers and strips of tapa and matting. Some *unu* were crudely anthropomorphic, others zoomorphic, but most were in the shapes shown in figures 3-8, 3-9, and 3-12. The sources differ concerning their function. One claims that they were erected to commemorate a human sacrifice, but as Emory pointed out they were also found at marae where human sacrifice did not take place (1933:15). Another account identifies them as memorial posts for local chiefs whose bones had been deposited in the marae, but in Henry's view they served mainly as racks for the objects that were presented to the gods (1928:134). As pointed out by Emory, the fact that they were characteristically set up on *ahu* whose tops lacked stone uprights suggests that some may have been substitutes for the latter (1933:16).

In describing 'gods' beds' (*ava'a*) I noted that under some of them were cists said to have contained the discarded trappings of *to'o* (god-images)—that is, items that were too dangerously "sacred" for disposal elsewhere. Stone cists have been found by archaeologists in several marae—in walls, courtyards, and even in *ahu*. Some of them were found to contain human bones, but others were found to contain nothing but soil and rubble. What purpose, or purposes, such cists served is not entirely clear, but there are suggestions in the sources that some of them were used as temporary burial chambers for a marae congregation's most distinguished members, prior to final deposit of the skeleton—or at least the skull—in more secret and secure places elsewhere.

In some of the few marae courtyards that have been excavated were found ordinary noncist burials containing complete or incomplete human skeletons. Some of these may be the remains of members of the marae's own congregation, but there are good grounds for concluding that most are remains of offerings, either victims that were deliberately sacrificed to the marae's tutelars, or enemies slain in battle and brought home as trophies.

As noted above, some offerings to a marae's tutelars may occasionally have been placed upon its *ahu* or walls, or buried in its courtyard; but most offerings, and particularly foodstuffs and tapa, were placed on the specially constructed altars (*fata*) already described.

Many marae contained special houses (*fare ia manaha* 'house of treasure') where images, drums, priests' vestments, and so forth, were stored, and where priests and attendants sometimes slept. These were in addition to the "moveable marae," or "arks" or gods' houses (*fare atua*, fig. 3-13) described earlier, which were seen on some marae by visitors. Also associated with some marae were special sheds (*va'a ti'i*, *fareva'a a te atua*) that served to shelter the canoes used to transport the tutelar images when it was necessary for them to travel. Because the "sacredness" of objects used

in marae rituals made them too “dangerous” to dispose of elsewhere, special refuse pits and heaps (*tiriapera*, *turuma*) were an architectural feature of most marae.

Finally, a requisite feature of most marae was the “sacred” trees, already listed, which grew either within marae boundaries or nearby. Ellis provided a vivid word image of these trees and of the general atmosphere of marae precincts:

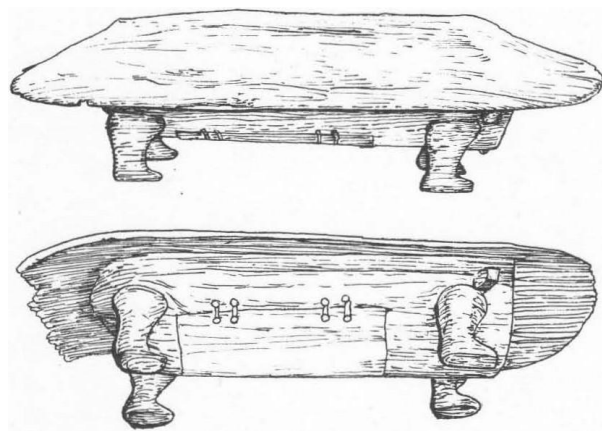


FIGURE 3-13. Wood god's house, length 87 cm. British Museum.

These were, excepting the casuarina-trees, of large foliage and exuberant growth, their interwoven and dark umbrageous branches frequently excluded the rays of the sun; and the contrast between the bright glare of a tropical day, and the sombre gloom in the depths of these groves, was peculiarly striking. The fantastic contortions in the trunks and tortuous branches of the aged trees, the plaintive and moaning sound of the wind passing through the leaves of the casuarina, often resembling the wild notes of the Eolian harp—and the dark walls of the temple, with the grotesque and horrific appearance of the idols—combined to inspire extraordinary emotions of superstitious terror, and to nurture that deep feeling of dread which characterized the worshippers of Tahiti's sanguinary deities. (1829:II, 208)

How “sacred” these marae trees were can be inferred from a passage from Bligh's journal:

In the Morning one of my Officers on shore having plucked a branch of a Tree called Tu tuee [tutu'i] or Tee ighree [ti'a'iri] that bears the Oil Nut, which was growing at a Morai, and accidentally bringing it into the dwelling where my people are at, all the Natives both Men and Women suddenly left it. When I came on shore I found a branch of this Tree tyed to one of the Posts, altho they saw the effect it had of keeping the Natives from the House, and notwithstanding I ordered it away no one would come near the place. They said the House was tabooed and that no one could come there untill the Taboo was taken off and that must be done by Tynan; he therefore from my Application promised to take it

away in the After Noon. Any thing taken away from a Morai is said to give great Offence to the Eatua, no one will therefore come near the place where such an Article has been deposited untill they are satisfied that through prayer their God is no longer displeased. (1789:II, 13-14)

Until now I have discussed the structures I call marae as if they had all served the same general purposes, although noting that some were more elaborate architecturally than others. This of course is an oversimplification, and later chapters will reveal that in some instances differences in marae architecture were reflections of specialization in marae functions; (I believe that this and not the reverse was the causal sequence). Nevertheless, all the marae heretofore discussed were alike in being what might be called primary religious edifices—in contrast to those that might be labeled subsidiary ones. The latter were usually located close to, or in some instances directly adjacent to, primary marae; but they seem to have been so physically separated from the latter and so functionally highly specialized as to warrant separate treatment. There may have been several types of such subsidiary marae, but the only type that can be archaeologically identified is the one archaeologists call “shrine” (Green et al. 1967:141).

In most cases shrines were, literally, adjacent to the walls of primary marae. Nearly every edifice so far identified as a shrine contained the same features: three columnar stone uprights near one end with a stone slab backrest in front of and facing them. In addition, in many shrines have been found small anthropomorphic stone images set into the ground between backrest and uprights. It is reasonable to suppose that such images, before they were removed by latter-day curio hunters, were a characteristic feature of many shrines.

The sources are virtually silent concerning the specific functions, distinct from conventional primary-marae ritual, served by these shrines. From their small size and limited architectural elements, however, it is tempting to identify them as places where individual priests—or individuals acting as priests—addressed prayers and queries to spirits concerning matters of less public importance than those transacted in the primary marae itself. In this respect, shrines were practically identical with some of the smaller, discrete primary marae located in large marae complexes. On the other hand, the presence of a stone image on many shrines suggests a somewhat more specialized function—that of protecting the primary marae from hostile spirits by means of a fetcher-type spirit familiar (*ti'i*) embodied in the *ti'i*-like image (Beaglehole 1962:I, 303). The sources refer to sorcerers (*tahutahu*), attached to some of the larger primary marae, whose office was “... to avenge the king and chiefs on their enemies, to annihilate offending *tahutahu* of an inferior order, to destroy a national foe, and to aid the warrior by performing deadly rites upon slain or captured chiefs in time of war” (Henry 1928:206).

Maohi marae were located in a variety of settings: on the shore itself (sometimes even built out into the lagoon), on the flat coastal plains or on valley floors, and on the sides or summits of hills. According to Emory the builders seem to have followed no consistent rules of orientation either with regard to loci on the horizon or to the slope of the land (1933:26, 31).

Some marae were unitary, others were parts of complexes which included one or more principal "primary" edifices, a number of small lesser ones, shrines, an open courtyard for "secular" meetings, and occasionally an archery platform (figs. 10-1, 10-2, 10-3). A few of the smaller edifices were located near what appear to have been dwelling sites; these were probably what Henry called "family" or "ancestral" marae (1928:119). The ones associated with larger social units and more widely venerated gods probably were well isolated from dwellings, because—among other factors—of the mutual necessity of separating them from the usual haunts of females.

The basic function of marae was everywhere the same—to provide humans with fixed places and appropriate appurtenances for communicating with the gods "... in a befitting manner" (Henry 1928:429). Also, each marae had its own more or less exclusive congregation; but the character of such congregations greatly differed, as did the particular purposes which each marae served. These matters, which concern in large measure the very structure of Maohi society, will be discussed in later chapters; but I will list here the types of social units which comprised congregations: kin groups of various sizes and spans, occupational "guilds," tribes, and supratribal cults.

In the foregoing it has been made evident that females were generally excluded from most marae. Some sources imply, however, that they were admitted to services at their own family's domestic place of worship. There were occasions, such as the inauguration of a chiefess or the marriage of an upper-class couple, when the female principals were admitted within the precincts of larger and more public marae, but at such times elaborate steps were taken to insulate the marae from the women's ritual-nullifying "secularity" and to protect the women in question from the marae's dangerous "sacredness." This, however, does not mean that females did not "belong" to marae congregations or that they remained in social and religious limbo in this regard. All it does mean is that they were not active participants in marae rituals; in this respect males were their representatives and acted on their behalf.

The concept of "congregation" also requires broadening in another respect. While it is true that each marae was associated more or less exclusively with a single social unit, whatever its nature or scale, there may have been occasions when exclusiveness did not prevail, for example:

Their *morais* are a kind of refuge for criminals of every kind; they fly to them when in any imminent danger, and, according to the custom of the country, must not be taken from thence (Turnbull 1813:366).

The sacred ground around the *morais* affords a sanctuary for criminals. Thither, on any apprehension of danger, they flee, especially when numerous sacrifices are expected, and cannot thence be taken by force, though they are sometimes seduced to quit their asylum. (Wilson 1799:339)

Interpreted broadly this could indicate that fugitives in general, (but not, evidently, intended victims for sacrifice) might find refuge in any *marae* (and not just those with which they were somehow affiliated). A text in Henry about these intended victims notes: "... fugitives that were chased by warriors, conspirators and captives who were chased to be slain, would run to the front of the *marae* and were saved. But persons destined to be sacrificed, found no place of refuge in all the land. When they ran before the *marae*, they were slain there, that was their proper place" (1928:150). Unfortunately, the evidence available permits me neither to confirm nor deny the possible generality of this statement, with its potentially far-reaching social implications. In this connection I note a passage from Henry regarding the extension of the notion of *marae* sanctity: "The house of a great man [*ta'ata mana*] became his *marae*; persons escaped being slain when they ran into his home, except those appointed for sacrifices" (1928:150-151).

I reproduce a chant, published in Henry and collected by Orsmond from the high priests Tamera and Pati'i. Some of its passages and references will already be familiar to the reader; others will become clearer as this description proceeds. It indicates, better than any other native text I have discovered, the central importance possessed by these edifices in the thoughts and activities of the Maohi:

O te *marae* nei te mo'a e te hana-hana
o te fenua; 'o te teoteora'a ia o te ta'ata no
teie mau fenua. O' to te fenua ia unuana te
marae; a aora'i ia i pupu hia na te atua.

A'ore e ta'ata i ta'ahi noa i to te tahi e
ra *marae*, i ha'apao ra i to ratou iho. No te
marae tupuna nei i tao hia ai e e ai'a fenua
to te ta'ata.

E vahi hahano rahi e te hau rahi te
marae; ei tere pure to te ta'ata i tae atu ai i
reira a'ore atu e tere e, A'ore te atua i vare.
Ia tae te ta'ata i te vahi *marae* ra, e nao e
atu ia te haere, e tu'u i te ahu i raro mai te
taponu e tae atu i te papa, e mau raro hia te
hopoia i te rima, e ia moe atu taua *marae* ra.

Marae were the sanctity and glory of
the land; they were the pride of the people
of these islands. The ornaments of the land
were the *marae*, they were the palaces pre-
sented to the gods.

People did not intrude upon others'
marae, but they adhered to their own. It was
owing to the ancestral *marae* that people
could say they had an inheritance.

A place of dread and of great silence
was the *marae*; a person's errand must be
to pray in going there, but for no other pur-
pose. The gods could not be deceived. When
persons approached a place where stood a
marae, they gave it wide berth, they lowered
their clothes from their shoulders down to
their waists, and carried low their burdens
in their hands, until they got out of sight of
it.

Ei te otue toro i tai ra te marae ari'i; ei te ooa ra ta marae o te ra'atira; 'o uta ra na te mau poti'i ia, oia te manahune.

E vahi ra'a te marae, e vahi hahano; e fa'atupura'a manava hirahira, e vahi iriha te marae.

E mea ri'ari'a roa te marae o te hui ari'i; te marae tupuna e te marae o te fenua! E vahi turuma ta'a e roa, e vahi amiami e te hauriria; e vahi mamae no te tahu'a e te fatu, e na te mau ta'ata ato'a. E mea mamae te patu marae; ia hape noa te pua'a i te patu marua ra, e'ore roa te fatu pua'a e'ite fa'ahou atu, mo'a ihora ia na te atua. Te va'a e hoe na tahatai ra e fa'a'ateatea roa ia tae i te otue marae ari'i ra, e tu'u te ahu o te ta'ata i raro, e hoe maru noa e ia ta'a e atu taua vahi ra.

E mana to te tihi marae; te ta'ata e a'ua'u hia e te 'aito ra, te orure hau e te titi, ia a'ua'u hia e tupai ra, e horo i mua i te marae e ora ia. Area ra te ta'ata i ha'apaohia ei tapu ra, 'a'ore a'na e vahi oraora i te fenua nei. Ia horo oia i mua i te marae ra, o te ha'apohe ra'a 'tu ia, o te vaira'a mau ia.

I riro te fare o te ta'ata mana ei marae no'na; e ora te ta'ata ia horo iroto i taua fare ra, eiaha te feia i ha'apaohia ei tapu. No reira te parau i nao hia nei e: "E are 'oe i te iriaputa mua o to'u fare; o ta'u marae hoi to'u fare, o te āhu mua tei to'u iriaputa mua."

E mea poiri rumaruma i te ra'au nui o taua mau marae ra; e o te hau roa i te ra'a o te miro ia, oia te amara; E ta'ere tera no te 'oro'a; E ta'ere tera no te Ari'i; E fa'a'ara i te atua; E ha'amaui i te maro o te Ari'i.

Upon the prominent points were the royal marae; in the bays were the gentlemen's marae; and behind them were the marae of the girls, that is, the common people.

A holy place was the marae, an awe-inspiring place; it was a place that awakened conscience, a dreaded place.

Terrible were the marae of the royal line; their ancestral and national marae! They were places of stupendous silence, terrifying and awe-inspiring; places of pain to the priests, to the owners, and to all the people. The walls of these marae were repelling; when a pig chanced to stray upon a wall fallen down, its owners never saw it again, it became sacred to the gods. When a canoe passed along the shore, it withdrew far off as it approached the point where stood the royal marae, the people lowered their clothes, and paddled lightly until they passed the place.

Potent were the horns of the marae; fugitives that were chased by warriors, conspirators and captives who were chased to be slain, would run to the front of the marae and were saved. But persons destined to be sacrificed, found no place of refuge in all the land. When they ran before the marae, they were slain there, that was their proper place.

The house of a great man became his marae; persons escaped being slain when they ran into his home, except those appointed for sacrifices. From this circumstance arose these words: "Beware of the front door of my house; my house is my marae, the front door has the front step."

It was dark and shadowy among the great trees of those marae; and the most sacred of them all was the *miro* which was the sanctifier. That was the basis of the ordinances;

It was the basis of royalty;

It awakened the gods;

It fixed the 'uru girdle of sovereigns.

(Henry 1928:150-151)